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NEAR EASTERN CERAMICS

IN the Accessions Room for the current month are shown twenty-four specimens of Near Eastern ceramics lately secured by the Museum through gift and purchase. Considered as a lot or individually, these pieces deserve attention since their acquisition brings the Museum collection of early Persian ware to a state of excellence scarcely bettered in any public gallery. The interest in such ceramics is of comparatively recent origin; for, although the romance and beauty of the later Persian art has long been known, it is only with the archaeological discoveries of the last two decades that any general appreciation has been developed for the more primitive arts of the Near East. As has previously been stated in the BULLETIN, Rhages, Sultana-bad, and Rakka were thriving cities and centers of a high civilization, two Persian, the third Mesopotamian, all of which, for various causes, perished in the thirteenth century. Rubbish mounds now are the only remains that mark the sites, and during the last few years these have been systematically excavated by either native speculators or Armenian merchants, who were the first to bring examples of early Persian art to the Occident. The great yield of the mounds has been in pottery, generally broken, and varying widely in period and excellence, its rudeness and age increasing with the depth of the excavations. Such pottery is, however, always infused with the spirit of the age and people which produced the poets Omar, Sadi, and Hafiz, and in decorative invention, charm of design, and beauty of color, it has never been excelled by the ceramics of any people. Since the first purchase of a few examples of this ware, described in the BULLETIN for April, 1909, the collection has been steadily increased, with a strict regard for exceptional quality in the pieces, until the lot owned by the Museum is uniformly excellent and comprises a number of the best examples of Persian ceramics yet discovered.

The earliest piece in the Accessions Room antedates the existence of Persia as a nation and may be termed Sassanian. It dates from about the sixth century A. D. and in

the method of incising the design under a brownish yellow glaze resembles the contemporary pottery from Fostat, Egypt, of which the Museum owns several hundred fragments. The decoration of the Sassanian plate shows a bowman on horseback, leading by a chain a leopard or cheetah; the drawing is ill proportioned and the ornament very primitive, but the piece has a barbarous force which is very different from the more languid refinement of the later ware.

Next in age is a bowl, also with incised decoration, but of much finer potting than the Sassanian piece, which it somewhat resembles in glaze. It was excavated at Rhages and represents the early pottery of that city, called Gabri ware, made in the ninth or tenth century, and recently discovered at a depth of from thirty to forty yards underground. Rhages, once the rival of Bagdad, with a reputed population of more than half a million, was overwhelmed and practically destroyed by the Tartar invaders early in the thirteenth century, and almost all the pottery now excavated from the desolate ruins of the city was made anterior to its invasion, and much must have been produced only shortly before its fall, so similar is it in style to dated specimens made in the first years of the thirteenth century. A very finely potted body of light weight whitish-yellow clay is the chief characteristic of Rhages ware, which in decoration may be divided into three main classes: one ornamented in copper lustre, a second modeled in relief and then glazed in a solid tone, the third painted in colors on a white enamel ground and sometimes touched with gold. One small bowl of the first kind is included in the new purchase, to supplement the several specimens already owned by the Museum, while a blue bowl of the second type is proof-potting of the first order, and one of the best examples of that technique yet brought forward. A specimen of the third variety is a decorative dish in blue and black on white, while under the same classification but of the finest kind, called Royal Rhages, is a jug in blue and other colors, liberally enriched with gold, one of the masterly productions of the Persian potter.



VASE, MESOPOTAMIAN
RAKKA, ABOUT X CENTURY

PITCHER, PERSIAN
RHAGES, XI-XII CENTURY



PLATE
PERSIAN, SASSANIAN DYNASTY
ABOUT VI CENTURY

From Rakka, a city once the residence of Haroun-al-Raschid, comes the unusual vase of albarello or drug-pot form, ornamented with grotesque camels, painted in green. The colors are not those of ordinary Rakka pottery and the piece is older than those generally seen, having been made about the tenth century.

The ceramics of Sultanabad are represented by three pieces: one a tall and interesting flask ornamented with figures and arabesques executed in lustre on a light ground, the second a wall tile showing deer among foliage, the third a large jar glazed in blue and covered with a thin crust of iridescence, a result of burial in the earth. This piece, received in the Draper bequest, is an example of a type rapidly growing in popularity, numerous smaller specimens having been bought recently by private collectors in New York.

The development in technique which the Persian potter had attained in the following three hundred years is shown by the four fine wall tiles of the thirteenth or fourteenth century, presented to the Museum by Mrs. Frederick Ferris Thompson. The combination of modeling, lustre, and color which these specimens show is characteristic of the beautiful tiles generally associated with the mosque at Veramin, the inner walls of which were covered with a brilliant veneer of ceramics celebrated in the annals of Persian art. Three of the specimens given by Mrs. Thompson are inscribed with portions of Koranic texts.

The art of all regions of the Near East shows a common inspiration; ceramic ware in Syria is closely related to that of Persia.

Mrs. Thompson's gift includes two excellent Damascus single tiles of the seventeenth century in various colors, and a large panel of nine pieces of the early eighteenth in blue and white. The latter shows the three prayer niches of Mohammedan faith, which contain the names of the Prophet and his chief saints, and in its white body and greenish glaze is characteristic of the most widespread variety of later eastern ware. What this ware was in Persia is shown by a plate and a large vase, both purchased and both formerly part of the exhibition of Mohammedan art held at Munich in 1911. These specimens are among the best of their kind, being much more skillfully made than the usual pieces. Two other plates further illustrate the variety, which, although really a faience, is semi-porcelainous in effect and is often called Gombrun porcelain, from its reputed place of manufacture.

Some later plates of Bokhara pottery are also included in the purchase, as they exemplify the last phase of Near Eastern ceramics, when the art receded to border countries from more civilized centers of production. The very decorative output of this inaccessible region where Slavic, Mongol, and Arab elements combine with most exotic results is little known in the West, although the fantastic brilliancy of color and pattern in Bokhara work shows a curious similarity to some of the most modern of European decorative art, the good qualities of which are just beginning to be appreciated in this country.

D. F.